



Students worry about future of adult ed pottery class

## Sign of the times

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Nanette Mattos would lose her creative outlet so needed to maintain balance in her busy life. Annette Gonzales would miss the "therapy" that allows her to express her caring for her loved ones by making sculptures as gifts. Diane Gilmartin would lose the calming hobby that helps her disabled family friend with social integration through art.

All three are students at Hanford Adult School's pottery and ceramics class, and are increasingly nervous about what will happen to the long-standing self-enrichment course if enrollment keeps dropping.

Recent budget cuts have forced the school to implement a hefty fee increase, hoping the course will begin paying for itself. As a result, the enrollment in the previously popular self-enrichment class has seen a dramatic decline over the past year.

Although officials say they have no plans to stop offering the course, it certainly raises a red flag for a fee-based, demand-driven adult school class like the pottery class.

The effect of low enrollment was visible one recent night, as the ceramics studio at Hanford High School sat largely empty with seven or so students. Just a year and a half ago, the class was booming - as it had been for at least two decades - with full enrollment two nights a week.

Mark Tunison, who teaches the class, lamented the impact of the fee hike, coupled with the economy and rising gas prices. He sees it as a wake-up call.

"We got complacent a little bit about the success that we've had," Tunison said. "We took it for granted that there would always be 25 or 30 students who'd sign up, but we found out that the economy and the fee raises affected us more than we imagined."

Adult education programs anywhere in California are in for tough times. The Hanford Adult School is no exception.

For decades, adult education funding was required to be used for just that, providing adults with high school diploma classes and offering a wide variety of programs from ESL to health care vocational courses to hobby classes. But it has changed over the past year, when categorical restrictions were lifted for programs, including adult education. That gave school districts the flexibility to redirect a chunk of money for other needs.

The Hanford Joint Union High School District receives about \$1.6 million a year in funding for adult education. Fiscal difficulties forced the district to use \$1 million of it to fill its budget hole this fiscal year, leaving the adult school with \$600,000, said Hanford Adult School Principal Gary Marr. The school is an extension of the Hanford Joint Union High School District.

With a majority of its funding cut, the school has been focusing on its core programs, such as the Certified Nursing Assistant program, ESL and general educational development courses, Marr said. Meanwhile, the school raised the fee for the pottery class from \$25 to \$125 last fall.

Enrollment in the class has also since taken a nosedive, with the number of students falling to 17 in the fall and 10 this spring.

"It was a difficult choice to make," Marr said. "We had to prioritize where our general funds would be utilized. We looked at our options and decided we were going to have to increase the fees for the class. I was hoping it wouldn't affect the enrollment quite as much as it has. Unfortunately it has."

The cost of offering the class - with materials and instructor pay - can run around \$3,500 a semester, Marr said. With only 10 students in the program, the school has had to subsidize more than 50 percent of the cost out of its general fund to keep the program running, Marr said.

"At this point in time, we're not planning on discontinuing the program," Marr said. "We're hoping that more students will enroll. I'd like to see it go up to at least 20 [students]."

Because the number of students is crucial to making sure that the class stays open, now is the time to get the community involved, said Tunison, a retired, longtime pottery teacher at Hanford High School who continues to serve the community through his art. "I think the biggest thing is making sure people know that it's still available," he said.

Mattos has been attending the pottery class since 2002. It's easy, even for the untrained eye, to recognize that she is a skilled potter. Working on her unfinished yet handsomely shaped clay vessel, she said pottery has become an important part of life.

"I would never ever think of missing this class," said Mattos, a math teacher with the Fresno County Office of Education. "I've always known I wanted to do pottery all my life. This class, with some very masterful people who are willing to help me, has given me a chance to explore in the clay, grow in the clay, express myself in the clay. I would've never been able to do this if not for this class."

Mattos said one of the best things about the class is its inclusiveness and the diversity of students - men and women at different skill levels helping one another to better themselves.

Gilmartin, an adopted physical education specialist with the Kings County Office of Education, uses the pottery class to express her creativity as well as an opportunity to work with Michelle, her family friend who has disabilities.

"It allows Michelle to use both of her hands. She has a weaknesses on one side, so it helps her with motor skills," Gilmartin said. "You can see how clay starts from a ball in the beginning and it comes out in the end as a plate, cup or sculpture - it makes you proud. I have a lot of the work that Michelle and I had done in my garden and she has them around her yard."

Gonzales, another long-time student, is more of a sculptor. She finds healing in working with clay.

"It's my therapy," she said. "I enjoy making things for people. I can't imagine not coming. Everybody in my family knows not to call me on Tuesday night because of this class."

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